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ABSTRACT

The origins and development of the Missoula Council for Child Protection and Family Support are traced during its first 9 months as a community group focusing upon projects and issues to alleviate child abuse and neglect. The approach used is described as a mixture of rural community development and planning. Among projects listed as completed thus far are: public service announcements (television announcements, radio script, posters, and a toll-free number for specific details); resource library; Parents Anonymous (a local P.A. chapter was formed and a state coordinator selected through the Council's efforts); child sexual abuse dolls kit (two sets of anatomically correct dolls were purchased for treatment and diagnosis of young victims); and a community-wide survey of services to children and families was completed. This survey elicited information about the range of services, unmet needs, and priorities for services; 53 different programs for families and children were identified. Council priorities for planning and action resulting from the survey are listed as community education, education in the schools, self-help groups, developing new programs, and continued inter-agency coordination. The Council's major problem is seen as the limited amount of time and energy available to do needed projects, fund-raising, and organizational activities. (BRR)

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TOUGH TIMES: COMMUNITY COORDINATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES IN A RURBAN AREA

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The Missoula Council for Child Protection and Family Support began as a community group focusing upon projects and issues to alleviate child abuse and neglect in a western Montana county.

Several factors converged to provide the impetus for forming the Council. First was the feeling of crisis which pervaded social agencies as a result of federal budget cuts for social programs. Next was a perceived need to coordinate existing resources and programs in such a way as to reduce duplication and define unmet needs for serving abused and neglected children. The third element involved projects and services tailored to the unique needs of the area, which were not met by existing agencies.

Finally, the local county commissioners decided that programs for Missoula's abused and neglected children and families under stress should hold high priority in the community. To that end, they designated a county government staff member to convene social agency representatives and other interested community people to establish a community council. In addition, they published an advertisement for bids for someone to coordinate the Council part-time on a one-year contract. The authors were successful bidders and completed the first nine-month's work on the project at the time this article was written.

What Made The Council Go?

The Council is one of those "good ideas" that has been talked about often without previous action in our community.

Timing was a key reason that the Council became operational now rather than before. Child abuse and neglect is an important popular social issue. Service clubs have adopted the problem as a theme. The Federal government provided a large infusion of money during the 1970s for training, research and demonstration projects. Television broadcasts public service announcements urging the public to do something about stopping abuse and neglect of children. Simultaneously, money for child abuse and neglect programs is being reduced, particularly in the area of demonstration projects.

The support of the county commissioners emerged as the strongest single force for action and involvement. While the amount of money provided through the contract is not enough to staff and operate an agency, it provides unrestricted funding which has been useful for matching grants, funding small projects and paying necessary operational expenses of the Council. The emphatic support of the county commissioners has made it easier to enlist the involvement of agency staff and community people for the Council.

What Approach Was Used?

It was assumed that a community organization method which took into account the unique characteristics of our community would work best.

Tarleau determined that there is no definition of rurality which fits most real communities.[1] Therefore, we developed a specific description of our own rurban community. Missoula is a county seat, university town, a regional trade center for the western fourth of the state and has a county population of 80,000. It consists of a mix of many rural characteristics and a few urban features. The family and children problems of the local area do not seem markedly different from those of most other places. The community is unique in having a rich variety of available human resources at both informal and formal levels. This is due to the presence of the state university and the fact that Missoula has drawn many professional people away from the big cities to become permanent residents in its scenic Rocky Mountain location over the past fifteen years.

The community organization model we utilize is a mixture of rural community development and planning. We convened all known interested persons in the community who would consider working on specific projects and efforts to assist agencies who work with child abuse and neglect, education and awareness, and direct help to families suffering undue stress. Figure 1 shows the initial organizational structure of the Council. The difference between standing committees and project committees should be noted. Task committees are formed to complete a specific project and are disbanded upon completion of the assignment. Standing committees are appointed

COUNCIL FOR CHILD PROTECTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Organizational Structure

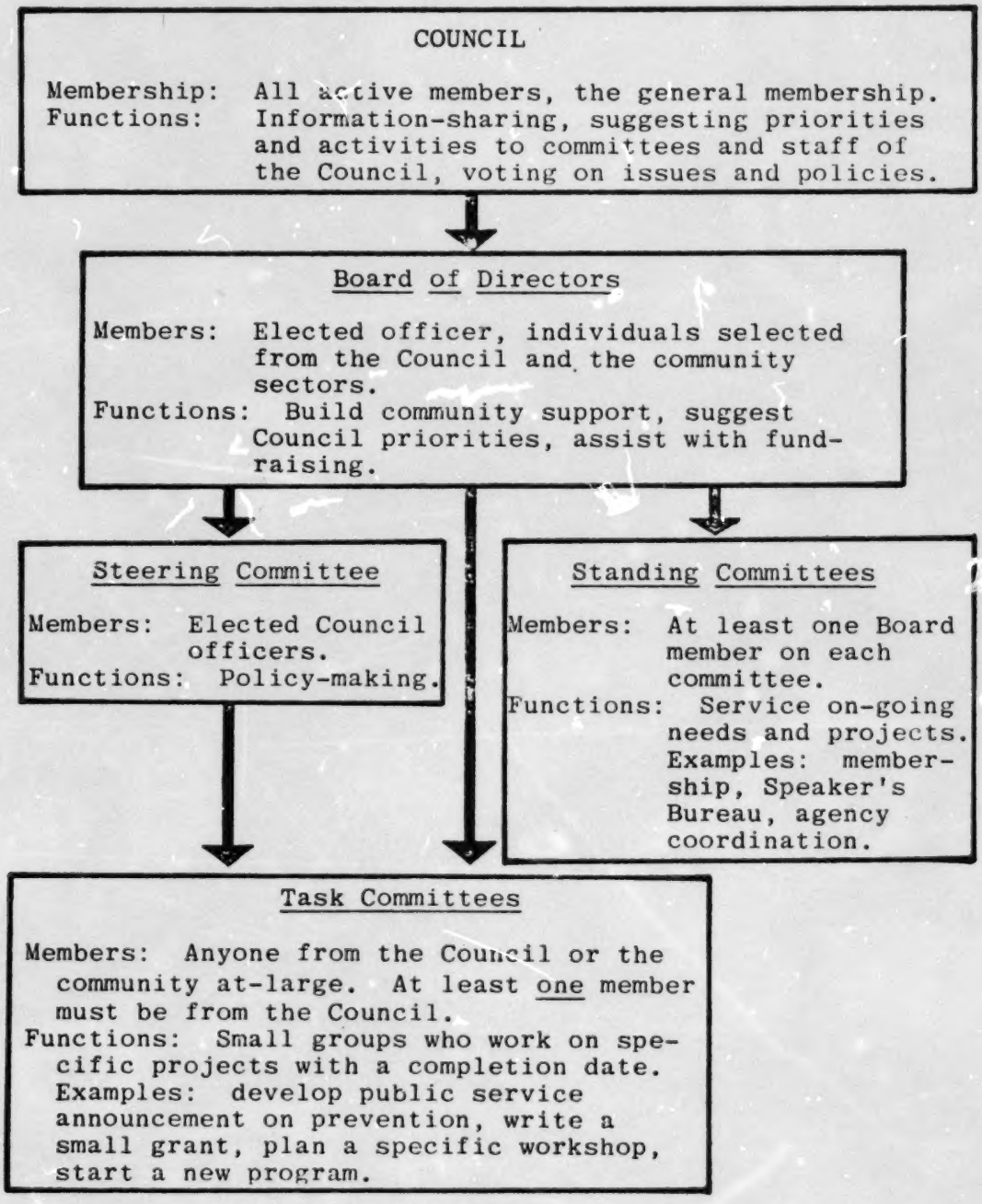
COUNCIL
Membership: All active members, the general membership.
Functions: Information-sharing, suggesting priorities and activities to committees and staff of the Council, voting on issues and policies.
Board of Directors
Members: Elected officer, individuals selected from the Council and the community sectors.
Functions: Build community support, suggest Council priorities, assist with fund-raising.
Steering Committee
Members: Elected Council officers.
Functions: Policy-making.
Standing Committees
Members: At least one Board member on each committee.
Functions: Service on-going needs and projects. Examples: membership, Speaker's Bureau, agency coordination.
Task Committees
Members: Anyone from the Council or the community at-large. At least one member must be from the Council.
Functions: Small groups who work on specific projects with a completion date. Examples: develop public service announcement on prevention, write a small grant, plan a specific workshop, start a new program.

Figure 1.

sparingly for ongoing functions, such as membership and the executive steering committee. A monthly program meeting of the Council is held for the general membership and the interested public. There is also a regular newsletter, which is widely circulated in the community. Prior to September 1, the Council will become a non-profit corporation with a board of directors replacing the steering committee. The rest of the organization will remain the same. It is important to keep the organizational structure tight and to conduct meetings only when they have a specific purpose. Otherwise, momentum and interest are lost.

Planning activities have involved developing prioritized project lists with target dates, a community survey, which is described elsewhere in the paper, and a community planning conference utilizing the data from the study. These efforts have helped to select appropriate and achievable targets for actions by the Council.

The rural community development approach was selected to provide a set of techniques and philosophy consistent with providing the community and Council members the maximum amount of control and decision-making.[2] The approach is consistent with the Council goal of initiating programs designed specifically to meet local needs, which utilize local resources where possible.

What Has The Council Done?

Even though operational less than a year, there have been important results specific to the needs of our community. Completed projects by chronological listing include:

Public Service Announcements (PSA): Ninety-second television announcements, radio script, and posters were made which talked about family stresses and reminded the public of the range of available family and children's services. A toll-free number was provided for the area health, social-service, and educational referral and information agency[3] where people could call for specific details.

Resource Library: All known and available child abuse and neglect pamphlets, books, and reports that could be secured free or at low cost were placed and catalogued at the information and referral agency's offices.

Parents Anonymous (PA): A local P.A. chapter was formed and a state coordinator selected through the efforts of the Council. A local service club assisted by providing printing services and legal assistance for drawing up non-profit corporation papers by its members. Child welfare mini-grant funds have been secured from the state social service agency to operate the P.A. chapter along with start-up funds provided by the national P.A. office.

Child Sexual Abuse Dolls Kit: Two sets of anatomically correct dolls used for treatment and diagnosis with young

children victims of sexual abuse were purchased for use by child protection workers and therapists in private practice.

Community-Wide Survey of Services to Children and Families: All local organizations having formalized programs for children and families were contacted for a detailed structured interview, which followed a 39-item schedule. The study elicited information about the range of available services, unmet needs, and priorities for services to families as seen by the agencies.[4] We were surprised to discover that there were fifty-three different programs in our relatively small community for families and children. A few social agencies had more than one program, of course. Twelve students in the University's Social Work research class adopted the study as their lab assignment, which provided needed personnel and research knowledge to design and conduct the survey. Tabulation and analysis yielded priorities for planning and action by the Council:

1. Community Education: Improved community awareness of child abuse and how to report it, parent education classes, information about existing programs.

2. Education in the Schools: Showing children ways to avoid physical and sexual abuse, training teachers to recognize and report abuse and neglect.

3. Self-Help Groups: Facilitating and initiating self-help groups, including Parents Anonymous.

4. Developing new programs: Initiating services that do not presently exist, through current programs.

5. Inter-agency Coordination: The study showed that existing coordination between agencies was a major strength of current efforts to serve abuse and neglect families, but that further attempts to enhance cooperation and coordination would be useful.

Liaison with the Exchange Club

The Missoula affiliate of the Exchange Club, whose members are business and professional men, have adopted the Council as a lead project. They provide a stipend to help underwrite operating costs of the Council. In addition, they have agreed to assist with specific fund-raising projects and club members also donate professional services to provide needed technical assistance, particularly in legal, advertising, budgeting and organizational planning needs.

University Practicum Student.

The University of Montana Social Work Department approved a practicum student placement for the coming academic year who will become one of the part-time coordinators of the Council. Her duties will include community organizing, planning, administration and project development.

What Are The Problems?

A variety of difficulties have been encountered during the initial year of the Council. The major problem is the

limited amount of time and energy available to do needed projects, fund-raising and organizational activities. While there is no lack of talented, interested professionals and volunteers, all, including the coordinators, have other time commitments. Council members who work in agencies dealing with neglected, abused children often run out of energy as well as time for noon meetings or night sessions.

Building credibility for the organization has been a continual, though not insurmountable, problem. There have been many "do-gooder" efforts in the community which meant well but produced little. The Council must be sensitive to conflicts among agencies and avoid taking sides. The coordinators must be persons who are not identified as belonging to one faction to the exclusion of others. Most of all, we have observed that credibility has come from results in completing specific projects and tasks that Council members set out to accomplish.

Another continuing effort is the need to promote clarity about child abuse and neglect and the role of human services, including education, in the community. The public seems to feel that physical abuse is the only problem and that case finding and investigation is the major service needed. People are often shocked to learn about the incidence of sexual abuse and bored with the amount and variety of common neglect that goes on. Nevertheless, the public, the business community and civic groups have been receptive to understanding new

information about the situation. We have found that very little community education has been done in the past. As noted in other communities, private and public child welfare agencies are not funded or staffed to provide education and information to the public.[5]

The general organizational direction that the Council should take will remain an ongoing issue. It would appear to be unfortunate if success resulted in the creation of another permanent social agency with a paid staff, office, operational budget, and institutionalized ways of doing things. On the other hand, a paid coordinator on a half- to full-time basis would assure more continuity in accomplishing the many tasks and activities of the Council, while retaining the voluntary inputs and flexibility that now characterizes the organization.

The amount of effort that should be directed to fund-raising poses several questions. We have found it easy to raise moderate amounts of money for specific projects. There is more community involvement and commitment to any project which is locally financed.

On the other hand, it takes a lot of time to raise money, and time is the Council's most scarce commodity. The reduction in public funds for social agencies means more competition for funding from the private sector. The Council has to be watchful not to compete for funds against those very agencies it is trying to assist and support.

Where Will It Go From Here?

The Council is having a successful first year as judged against several criteria. It has become a stable though flexible organization in the community and has been able to generate funds to accomplish several major tasks and projects. Planning efforts have resulted in clear direction and some priority setting by the group. Community support is demonstrated by the involvement of local government, social agencies, a civic club and various private citizens.

During the second year, the Council will adopt a non-profit corporation structure with a fifteen-member board. The present coordinators will serve a second year, working towards a part- or full-time paid coordinator for the third year of operation.

Planning will include delineating small, immediate project needs from long-range efforts by the Council. A core of stable, operational funding will be sought, along with fund-raising projects for specific activities.

On every level, efforts will continue to be made to enlist the support and understanding of various constituencies of the community concerning the needs of its children who are being abused or neglected and to the families in difficulty and stress.

NOTES

[1]Alison T. Tarleau, "Rural Child Welfare: Education and Practice Issues," Human Services in the Rural Environment, 6 (Summer-Fall, 1981), p. 11.

[2]Salima Omer, "Rural Practice Models: Community Development," Social Work in Rural Areas, R.K. Green and S.A. Webster (Eds.), University of Tennessee, Knoxville, pp. 107-136. And James A. Christenson, "Community Development," Rural Society in The United States, D. A. Dillman and D. J. Hobbs (Eds.), Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1982, pp. 264-272.

[3]Five-Valleys Health Information Clearing House, Missoula, Montana, provides a comprehensive referral and information service on available social service, health and self-improvement organizations and consumer literature.

[4]Jon Bertsche and Robert Deaton, "Community-Wide Survey of Services to Children and Families," unpublished report, Missoula Council for Child Protection and Family Support, c/o TRIPL Associates, Missoula, Montana, 1982.

[5]Thomas F. Grazio, "New Perspectives on Child Abuse/Neglect Community Education," Child Welfare, 60, No. 5, May 1981, pp. 343-352.